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Age as trouble: towards alternative narratives of women's ageing

Abstract

Ageing is trouble for women: our longevity and a lifetime of gendered pay inequalities can leave us exposed to precarity and hardships in later life. Our bodies are thought troublesome as they sag from the registers of heteronormative attractiveness. Age is trouble too because it is the perfect site for the exercise of neoliberal cruel optimism; surveillance, monitoring, individualization and an increasing turn to the market for supposed solutions for the 'problem' of age. Can these ageing troubles be troubled and how? This paper applies a critical optimism to explore how older feminist-identified women make their aged-lives habitable in an anti-ageing culture. It discusses how feminism, as a changeable, mobile but mostly *problematic* resource because of its silence around ageing, nonetheless helped women (aged between 40 -101) articulate how their responses to anti-ageing culture are formed and informed and shaped their ambitions for ageing on their terms. This paper concludes by making a case for us 'age critically' and explores what obligations and opportunities that places on us as POWES feminist researchers and scholars.

Introduction: why age?

As mainstream research on ageing is argued to be 'gender blind' (Carney, 2018: 242), I want to use this opportunity to encourage us to place ageing more forcefully on our research agendas. I start this paper then, with an overview of why age should trouble us. I take in the familiar landscape of demographic changes before focusing on its material impacts on women's lives. However, my main concern is to take forward Lynne Segal's (2013) critical point that if we are to age *better* we need alternative narratives of ageing than are currently available. Prevailing narratives tend to ricochet between stories of misery and decline on one hand, and rather fanciful heroic narratives of ageing on the other. Between, through, and beyond these, the more messy, ambivalent, complex dynamics of our lengthening lives struggle to be articulated, heard and learned from. Furthermore, as Segal argues, we need alternative accounts in order 'to beat back the abiding stigma and menacing stereotypes of old age, to enable some affirmation of its own diverse distinctiveness and intricate, shifting particularities' (Segal, 2013:18-19). This paper shares work conducted through an ISRF fellowship project entitled 'learning to be old' which aimed to capture alternative stories with a view to understand what resourced and made them possible. We start however by contextualising women's ageing in a demographic 'age wave' and our neoliberal-infused responses to it.

Demographics and policy landscapes

Age has come to mean trouble: the number of people worldwide aged 65 years and over is projected to increase from 2010 levels of 520 million to 1.5 billion in 2050 (WHO, 2012). These changes are a product of lower birth rates, which in some countries are already barely at replacement levels, with a plateauing of population growth, migration, and falling mortality rates (Davies and Jones, 2016). Despite the many aspects and causes of demographic changes, it is ageing that looms largest in our socio-political imagination where it takes the form of a future social and economic threat. So, while Africa's population is predicted to grow and remain 'young', European populations, already older, are predicted to face a further worsening 'old-age dependency ratio' whereby the number of people aged 80 and above relative to those aged 15-64 (defined as a 'working population') is expected to increase from 2016 levels of 8.3% to 22.3% in 2070 (European Union, 2018). These predictions are significant because of their consequences for labour markets, housing, patterns of consumption, transport, technology, leisure, and for welfare and health spending (Harper, 2014). In short, there is considerable anxiety about the social consequences and economic costs of a greying population (Davies and Jones, 2016), but we should be clear that any threats are far from inevitable. They are determined by political and policy decisions not chronology: demographics are not destiny (Carney, 2018).

The dates of 2050 and 2070 may sound too far distant, but we can't regard ageing dispassionately, if I get there, I will be 84 years old in 2050 and many of you reading this will also be amongst the greying statistics We will be both *the* trouble and if predictions are right, we'll be *in* trouble should there be too few people to care for us or the state finances to support us. Yet, we don't need to wait for the years to pass to see some of the consequences in our own lives now: a key response to the trouble of age has been to 'reconstruct' pension plans and provision by adjusting the age at which one can retire and by extending working life (Lain, 2016). Those of us working in universities have seen these changes in our TPS and USS contributions and benefits. These reconstructions are related to a wider portfolio of policies and initiatives that comprise what may be variously termed as 'active', 'successful' or 'positive ageing'. Endorsed by the World Health Organisation 'active ageing' aims to increase and extend older people's participation and inclusion in society, not least by their remaining productive and healthy. By promoting self-responsibility for our ageing, active ageing policies promise the personal and social benefits of autonomy and well-being while reducing the number of fail, dependent, economically insecure, older people and thus the personal and social costs of ageing (Boudiny, 2012).

Yet this 'active ageing' is deeply troubling: while it is insensible to argue *against* responsibility and a healthy old age, we need to ask what is enacted through the promotion and ascription of responsibility. Critics highlight that the construction of the ideal active ageing citizen reproduces heteronormative, racialised, class privilege and material advantages (Marshall, 2018). They note too how the aging body is deftly shunted from the scene and with it any age-related illness and disabilities (Westwood,

2019). These fantasies and omissions serve to erase the structural determinants of health and the impacts of structural inequalities on ageing (Raisborough et al, 2014), while ‘restructuring dependency through positive activity’ (Katz, 2000:17). They also have the unintended consequence of moralising ‘good’ and healthy aging by relating healthy outcomes to personal will and self-management. Older people are, then, increasingly confronted with a sense of obligation ‘to function in ways that best approximate to the ideal of the independent autonomous adult – and for as long as possible’ (Lloyd 2004: 251) in order to avoid ‘the stigma and risks of dependency’ (Katz: 2000: 136). We should be mindful too of Segal’s (2013) critical observation that neoliberal notions of self-responsibility are promoted just at the time when health and social care provision is being ‘restructured’: for her and others, ‘active ageing’ policies form part of an ‘anti-welfare agenda’ (Segal 2013 18) and promote neoliberal subjectivities (Hasmanová Marhánková, 2011). We should be cautious then, of the ‘happy ever after’ stories of age (Marshall, 2018) that neglect ‘frailty, dementia, and hardship while stressing continuities between midlife and independent/active later life’ (Van Dyk, 2014: 93). In light of these critiques, active ageing starts to appear as a form of *anti-ageing* because it insists on the management or denial of ageing bodies, lives and relationships: in short, it endorses ‘growing older without aging’ (Katz, 2005, 188).

It is important to contextualize ageing because age holds particular and specific troubles for women. We might assume that this is because women’s life expectancy exceeds that of men. In 2070, women’s life expectancy increases to 90.3 years compared to men’s 86.1 (EU, 2018). Yet, it is not longevity itself that is of concern rather the quality of our lives and how they are resourced. Our longer lives make us more prone to what Margaret Gullette (2004) calls ‘social diseases’: the consequence of a life time of pollution exposure, the grind of shift and caring work and the impact of our varied living conditions. These occupational knocks and life strains make themselves known on our older bodies. Yet, perhaps more significantly, our longer lives are characterized by gender inequalities *accumulating through the life course*. For example, The Centre for Ageing Better (2017) found that while older people are over- represented in statistics of social isolation and poverty, it is older women who are the hardest hit. They found that older women were profoundly affected by a lifetime of part time, flexible, poorly rewarded work, glass ceilings, gender pay gaps and unequal pension provision. Of course these are complicated and deepened by hardships of intersecting power that also build up over time (Vlachantoni, 2019).

This means that current austerity measures will cast a long shadow over women’s future lives; women are already disproportionately affected by austerity: single mothers made up some 85% of those affected by recent benefit cuts (Syal, 2019). Women are also affected by the erosion of state-run services that women depend on in times of distress and hardship (Durbin et al 2017). Those of us just heading into retirement have been immediately affected by the UK Pension reforms that have assumed a ideal male worker when they sought to equalize the state pension age

(Grady, 2015). Women's State Pension age (SPA) has increased by up to six years since 2010, often leaving women with little time to make alternative preparations, even if that possibility existed. Holman et al (2018) argue that the Pension Act 2011 delayed the pension of some 500, 000 women for up to eighteen months, which had further consequences on women's claim to winter fuel allowance and concessionary travel. Women are not, of course, an homogeneous group and so the affects may be unevenly distributed. Carrino et al (2018), for example, found that the increase in SPA has had a significantly negative impact on the physical and mental health of women in routine-manual occupations, resulting in a widening gap in health between women in different parts of the labour market. Research to date suggests that these inequalities will widen over time and be quite harshly realised in our later years (Vlachantoni, 2019). It seems clear that any analysis of gendered inequality would be enhanced by a concern for this accumulative effect.

Anti-ageing culture: the fear of those 'fine lines'

These demographic shifts and policy responses to ageing interact with social norms and consumer culture to support an anti-ageing *culture*. This is increasingly evidenced (and normalized) in a battery of promissory anti-ageing properties in super foods (so called nutraceuticals), crèmes and potions, cosmetic procedures, shampoos (to defy the tell-tale signs of aging follicles), a raft of surgeries and injections, fitness regimes, and the latest biomedical and bioengineering advances that can 'combat' age. This brief list is evidence of Petersen's (2018) point that the threats posed by demographic changes have been seized upon as economic opportunities.

Accordingly, the industries developing treatments for ageing are predicted to grow from US\$140.3 billion in 2015 to US\$216.52 billion by 2021 (Nasdaq GlobalNewswire, 2017 cited in Petersen 2018). The success of anti-ageing products and services rests on their ability to exploit the folding together of youthfulness and health, with socially approved performances of responsible selfhood. These are further knitted together by an anxiety/ fear of the stigma of ageing as [frailty](#) and dependency. There is then, a strong resonance between active-ageing policies and the anti-aging messaging pulsating through everyday consumer culture and lifestyle with the ubiquity of salted caramel.

That anti-ageing culture is specifically gendered relates to a long-held ambivalence around women's aging that pertains to women's 'worth' in their post-reproductive years (Segal, 2013; Gorton and Garde-Hansen, 2012:1-4). It also relates to women's [lifelong](#) experiences of bodily-objectification and appearance- surveillance (Calasanti, 2007, Anderson, 2019). As women are confronted with a body 'requiring constant work' (Gallagher and Pecot-Herbet, 2007: 60), the labours, performances and practices of engaging with anti-ageing are culturally expected and normalised (indeed, it is hard to escape anti-aging because is stamped on most of tools/products required to produce heteronormative femininities).

That anti-ageing culture demands women's attentive labours speaks directly to the magical properties age acquires in popular lifestyle culture (makeover shows and adverts for example). Age is both an inevitable progress of time that leaves its marks on and in the body (Weber, 2012), *and* a state that can be *reversed* and *repaired* (Coupland, 2009). This seemingly impossible state makes ageing the ideal site for the transformative attentions of makeover shows and promissory anti-ageing treatments. For example, ageing, or more correctly its *appearance*, is presented as the cause of the many problems that bring women into the makeover in the first instance. 'Ageing as inevitable' explains the existence of failed abject women: they are represented as being displaced from the perceived pleasures and rewards of heterofemininity because age has diminished their sex appeal/allure rendering them invisible to a privileged (male) audience. Ageing also feeds explanations for an abject woman's poor zest for life (usually indicated by a lack of the usual feminized markers of self-care and body work- this woman has tellingly 'let herself go').

Yet, 'ageing as reversible' allows anti-ageing practices to emerge as logical and necessary means of redemption and a re-positioning back into the established order of consumption and femininity. In short, anti-aging culture, as graphically illustrated in makeover shows is gendered, because cultural representations increasingly suture ideals of productive, healthy, and active citizenship to ideals of ageless or youthful, sexually alluring, hyper consuming femininity (Slevin, 2010). I have argued elsewhere that makeover shows serve a pedagogical function ([Raisborough et al, 2014](#)): we learn that there are perils and threats associated with uncontrolled ageing such as diminished self-esteem and a social invisibility (Walkner et al, 2018), the fear of which compels women to make their 'chronological ages imperceptible through the use of beauty work' (Hurd Clarke and Griffin 2008: 653). We are taught to 'look for our age' in the creases of our eyes, the sagging of our jaw lines, in the quantity and quality of our sex lives, in order to optimise life itself by achieving what Tincknell calls a 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (2011: 91).

Alternative narratives : space for optimism?

As anti-ageing pulsates through policy and popular culture it seems rather naïve to think we can be optimistic about our chances of developing those alternative narratives of women's ageing that Segal (2013) argues are so critical to combat ageism. On one hand there is little to be optimistic about because as we have seen, just the act of living longer compounds women's lifetime of inequalities to produce a materially precarious older life. On the other hand, we should be critical about the *excessive* optimism that characterizes neoliberal policies of 'active ageing': our attachments to a youthful self-worth defined by age-denial and a *stretching* of youthfulness for as long as we are able, can best be understood as a 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011). Things aren't looking good for our ageing.

Yet, there are good reasons to carve out a critical optimism: for some time there has

been a growing disquiet with academic theorizing that has restricted itself to the twin activities of criticism and critique: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in 2003 warned against the spread and seduction of ‘paranoid’ academic practice defined as that which exposes just how ‘things are bad and getting worse’ (p. 143). Sasha Roseneil (2011) argues that this frustrates our ability to theorise well about how people live in the present and weakens our accounts on the complexities of social change. Our ability to apprehend nuanced ways of living are at the heart of what Wood and Litherland (2017) have recently termed a ‘critical feminist hope’. They argue that while there is much to despair when we witness the various distortions and re-appropriations of feminist politics and aspirations by neoliberal rationalities, there still persists possibilities of hope, resistance and feminist praxis. There are as Sara Ahmed (2017) details, still ways of *living* a feminist life - a living which indicates much of the twisted complexity of contemporary gendered power relations. A move to hope or optimism is not then an embrace of apolitical cheerfulness or happiness, but a concerted attempt to embrace ‘complexities and uncertainties, with openings’ (Solnit 2016). Much of this resounds with Mary Holmes’ (2016) careful outline of what she calls a ‘critical optimism’. This is characterized *inter alia* by (i) a focus on possibilities not just problems (ii) attention to relationships, specifically how people may be ‘resources for each other’ (p.11), (iii) a critical examination of agency in conditions of marginality and difficulty that complicate any simple notion of ‘reproduction and resistance’ and (iv) may stress pleasure and fun. This has provided the framework for my research on women’s ageing.

Yet, I want to add that what Holmes offers is a consideration not just of possibilities, but what might resource them. While Holmes suggests interpersonal relationships as a resource, there are indications from gerontology that we could also consider political, activist or intellectual resources for alternative ageing. For example, Richards’ et al (2012) participatory research engaged older women with professional photographers to develop alternative, ‘honest’ (p.65) images of women’s older life. The results showed some destabilisation of the ‘the usual ‘heroes of ageing’/‘bodily decline’ binary but tended to reproduce other binary categorizations of ‘nostalgic/melancholic or humorously carnivalesque’ (2012: 65). When reflecting on the difficulty of producing alternative images, Richards et al (2012) speculated that if the participants had not been ‘ordinary women’ but instead had been selected by their already critical take up of normative ageing, then alternatives may have been more discernable. They further intimated that a *feminist* orientation towards ageing might produce very different outcomes. We are left then, to think just what might be hoped for feminism and how might it resource alternative accounts of ageing.

Feminist women ageing: Be part of the antidote

The reminder of this paper shares women’s voices from an Independent Social Research fellowship project. Armed with a critical optimistic desire to seek

possibilities of alternative ageing, I invited self-defined feminist-identified women to engage in making an antidote to the poison of anti-ageing, by sharing their ‘antidotal’ narratives about what is good about ageing. This deliberate provocation (‘poison’ and ‘antidote’ and ‘good’) was in light of Richard et al (2012) reflections above and served to help the self-selection of those already concerned with anti-ageing culture or who ‘pointedly perform ageing differently’ (Woodward, 2006:182). A call in social media and local press, and the help of women’s group produced a snowball sample of 60 women, the youngest was 40 and the eldest 101 years old, most of whom resided in the South East of England. The sheer number of women who wished to be involved is itself illustrative of an anger and bewilderment at a cultural incitement to youthfulness and too, a real need to speak well of their own lives. The sample was characterised by a clear class (middle) cis and ethnic (British and European white) privilege although there appeared to be a great variance in economic security. At best I can say that the women’s accounts speak to lower middle class experience of aging. The research comprised of focus groups at the local university campus and interviews in coffee shops for those mobile and in women’s homes for those who were not. Thematic analysis was applied to transcribed interviews and groups.

I want to take advantage of this [paper](#) by not offering a conventional report on the analysis but rather to give a sense of some of energy, warmth, and joy of the women’s accounts before leading into questions about the resourcing of women’s different performances of ageing. I do so mainly because I, and I suspect you, are not immune to anti-ageing. No wonder: the systematic denigration of our ageing is currently over-determined by neoliberal suspicions of vulnerability, dependency and care. We are also situated in a context of ‘generational combat’ (Macmanus, 1996) whereby the old are represented as in a parasitical relation to the young. There is a lot for us as researchers to confront here, nevermind our own ageing. So, we may know that ageing is trouble, but we may sense too that writing about it brings its own troubles. This is made wonderfully clear in Lynne Segal’s (2013) opening of *Out of Time*:

‘why write about ageing, when this troubling topic is so daunting, so complicated? My very hesitation, of course, tells me just how much needs to change before we can start to face up to the fearful disparagement of old age, including our own prejudices. I have to keep at bay so much anxiety around the subject, all that I project onto putative readers, my own abiding ambivalence’ Segal (2013: 1)

This emotional mix of reflexivity, prejudice and ambivalence makes work on ageing a profound and unsettling experience on personal and intellectual levels (although I have never been clear just how these are supposed to be separated as opposed to intertwined). In my case, the work has offered me a life-changing encounter with

ageing women – who with generosity, warmth and patience shared just what was *good* about getting old. I think this is worth sharing.

‘Antidotal’ accounts:

“Do I wish my husband hadn’t died? Yes. Most days. Do I have regrets? Of course. Do I wish I could still dance? Yes. I mean, there are times when I get so lonely it feels like I could just die and no one would know. But would I change anything really? I mean no Edgar, no wonderful daughter. All the memories. They all part of me. All I have that is mine is my life and I am still in it. [...] One thing age gives you is that you see just how precious life is, really, a marvel and I see it now” Betty 100 years old

“imagine, society telling you to be scared of living your life. I won’t have it” Suzi 58 years old

‘one thing getting older means is knowing that I am only getting one run at this and there’s no good fretting and mithering, or looking backwards, I am living it now’ Cynthia 79 years old

The research was characterised by a joy of age and getting older. The interviews and focus groups were infused with laughter, smiles and invariably ended in hugs. Unsurprisingly, given the twists and surprises of life, the joys of being older sat alongside, pushed through and surrounded, experiences of pain, sadness and brutal material disadvantages : women spoke of the hardships of life, feeling invisible, being vulnerably homed, a partners’ dementia, periods of crippling loneliness, illness, the acute pain of leg ulcers, depression, the death of a child, being frightened, grief, and bereavement. Significantly, the narratives of these older women did not account for these as obstacles, distractions or disruptions to be overcome with consumer choices or anti-ageing shampoos, rather they were folded into everyday life to become part of that life narrative. As Betty suggests above, the hard times are part of the life we live. Many women told me that their involvement in the research was fuelled by their awareness that women’s experiences of life, and particularly of getting older, and whatever we can learn from these, is not found in media representations of ageing women or appreciated by society: all of the women, albeit expressed in different ways, wanted to be part of this project to have their life celebrated and to help others lose a fear of ageing. What then, can be celebrated about our ageing?

Celebrating our ageing

Counter to the messaging from global pharma-cosmetic industries, ‘good’ ageing did not rest on wrinkle-free faces but how the women *felt* and what they were able to *do*.

“it’s the best kept secret – you just feel that you can pretty much get on and do anything. It is the most amazing confidence” Kay, 63 years old

Women in their 50s and 60s, particularly those still in paid labour, echoed Kay’s ‘secret’ that their ageing had increased their confidence. For one senior executive, Mandy aged 59, this confidence altered her approach to work. She felt she could be more relaxed and less competitive, she ‘confessed’ that while she still executes her work *well*, she doesn’t invest her emotions into it: ‘its part of my life not all of it now’. She felt this readjustment to work came from her years of experience and the levels of competence that this afforded her. Secure in her ability to do her job *well enough* made her a ‘better boss’ because she was more focused on the careers of others than her own. For other women, the 50s marked an end to an imposter syndrome that had dogged them for years. One senior university lecturer said ‘ I have got to the stage where I think well if they haven’t found me out now, I guess I am not an imposter anymore’. Nancy, aged 65, said ‘there was a point when that voice in your head, the one that says you can’t do it, switches off’.

Confidence was expressed in a range of ways. Not all women enjoyed financial security but that itself prompted some risk-taking: Pat, a nurse, 54 years old, told me ‘I’ve got a crap pension so what’s the point’ of working for a pension. She was leaving work to travel the world and hoped to pick up some work on her return: if she wasn’t going to be able to retire in her 60s then she was going to take some time off now. For an 88 year old, this burst of confidence resulted in taking up abstract art, for one it ended in proudly worn tattoo, for another it meant realizing a dream of learning to fly.

Other benefits attributed to getting older included: paying off the mortgage ; a tolerance towards others; being calmer; having time for friends and having time to ‘waste’; time to enjoy lovers, art and music and to engage with volunteer and activist work. Joys were found in watching one’s children mature, and for some, seeing grandchildren grow. For others, age brought an ability to pursue a long time passion or develop new ones. Betty at 100 years, delighted in her expertise of 1950s films and film stars : “I just didn’t have the time really, but now a real treat is my afternoon film’

Age also brought time to get to know ones-self , what Benni described as ‘being happy in one’s skin’:

“I think you just sort of get more comfortable in your own skin don’t you? I think when you are younger you worry about what other people think. There’s a saying, in your 20s you worry what everyone thinks of you, in your 30s you don’t care anymore, in your 40s you realize they weren’t interested in you in first place!” Benni 88 year old

Being self- content also helped develop a body- confidence. Worries about size/ shapes and appearance tended to lose out to an interest in what the body can *do*:

“I’m fitter now than I’ve ever been because that’s a really important aspect. Because there is that worry about, obviously, that the body starts to seize up as you get older. There’s not much you can do about it. That’s a biological sort of inevitability. So about three years ago, my daughter got me into yoga. And it’s made me feel much stronger within myself and I’m hoping that’s going to keep going into the 60s and on” Hazel, 58 years

The increased confidence in the self and in many cases in the body (‘I have surprising speed in my walking frame. Fear me slow couches’ roared Toni, 82 years old), helped women tackle increasing incidences of social invisibility. Personal experiences of ‘being looked though’, ‘being walked into’ or ignored in bars and shops were in most accounts of women aged over 60 years. Yet, these women spoke with some pride and humour about how they worked around it. Strategies included putting on weight so they had a physical presence: ‘more substance’ one woman told me, allowed her to take up space in public. Some women spoke of deliberately holding their space on pavements by walking in the centre so that people had to go round them. Insisting on recognition in shops and calling out when people pushed in front of them to be served. Another invested in a range of brightly coloured, large-framed glasses and forced people to make eye contact.

“I approach people with an overly cheery hello, It frightens the life out of them, yes, I look frankly deranged but they bloody see me and they have to respond” Jane 75 years old

For elderly women things were more difficult. Margo at 101 years old kept visible through social media and her passion for politics. Yet many women who were housebound, particularly past 80. struggled. “I think problems start when you stop being Mary and start being ‘dear’. I hate it’ said Mary aged 83 years old. What ‘dear’ meant was that women were no longer talked to but rather they were *talked at*. They also struggled to have access to people with whom to converse. Being a ‘dear’ and ‘talked at’ meant being reduced to the conditions that rendered them housebound: leg ulcers and bed sores. Nonetheless these women tried their best. They actively read the papers, watched the news, they developed a passion for an author / journalist or crossword setter and they engaged with phone-in radio shows. They tried to engage carers in ‘real’ conversation – but nonetheless, one woman, aged in her 90s said our interview was the first proper conversation that she had had in about 10 years. What was very clear is that none of these women cared a jot about their wrinkles: what they cared about was the world, the environment, politics, family and local community, but they felt silenced and ignored. Yet, they still persisted with the opportunities open to them. These more elderly women were the most critical of anti-aging: the secret of good age they said was being interested, being connected, being

informed ‘ Frankly my dear, if you live long enough, you are going to look like a prune. Save your money’ (Mary, aged 83 years)

What resources ageing?

All of the women in this study responded to a call for feminist-identified women. Feminism as a resource of alternative ageing was most explicit in women’s awareness of feminist arguments around women’s appearance; feminist thinking around the beauty myth fuelled their own resistance to anti-ageing products and an anger about what they saw as an extension of sexualisation and objectification into later life. For these women, the resisting of anti-age beauty was an extension of their avoidance of heteronormative beauty across their lives. Beyond that, however, feminism was not always deemed relevant to the way women aged. This had a lot to do with how feminism was defined and understood. Many women understood feminism in terms of gender equality or located the relevance of feminism to the work place or in some cases around the fairness of domestic labour. This meant that feminism had the most relevance to earlier periods of their lives and less so now

Women with wider definitions of feminism tended to be past activists. Over 20 women in the sample had taken part in women’s liberation activities and marches. Some had been engaged in radical actions around abortion access and campaigns around nuclear arms, sex work and domestic violence. For these women, feminism offered a political framework to understand how age and ageing are gendered and sites of gender inequality. Yet, as women (in this sample) now aged in their 70s and 80s, feminism provided not a present activism but rather tight friendship circles from their more active days. The shared values of social justice helped them to form friendships and networks that allowed them to ‘age well’ and to ‘look out’ for each other. In some cases then, it was a nostalgic relationship to feminism rather than an active consciousness that fuelled the ways they aged ‘differently’. Yet, it was these past-activists who were able to be critical of feminism itself

‘where’s the research? Where’s the literature? The focus is on younger, these post feminists and all that’s gone with them . We are still here, Hello! stuff happens up at this end of life. Not sure what feminism is now for me now’
Ingrid aged 78 years

There was then, a strongly expressed critical concern about the ability of feminism to speak to collective values of social justice and liberty not just for their age groups but for all women: the individualization and consumer friendly post-feminism left older women feeling feminism had both left them behind and let them down.

Women's resources came, instead from role models: older women in their lives who were brave, outspoken and generally trouble. To a woman they identified an older aunt, a mother, a teacher, or a leader. This really stresses the importance of inter-generational dialogue, interaction and exchange between women to enable role models. For others it was a being lesbian and their experience of battles to assert a sense of worth in a heteronormative society. Their battle scars and experience fed into the a more strident claiming of age by walking the streets and claiming space.

'I refuse to cross the road (to avoid a group of young people, or young men), I walk up to them. Right in their faces. You are not threat to me. I am not intimidated. It's my space too, I have done this all my life' Roxa aged 73 years old

I started this project with the hope that feminism was a key resource to alternative ageing. To some degree, feminism gave women an orientation, a critical turning to gender as a problematic at least at some stages and spheres of their lives. It also gave women a vocabulary of justice and power and an interpretive framework that allowed for a critical reading of cultural representations of ageing. But it was clear that feminism was an uneven and patchy resource, particularly for women who were not part of the academy or who had no or limited access to academic work for some years. Indeed, feminism was problematic because it was inaccessible, hard to understand and hard to apply to their real and older lives: it had become a young women's issues and many worried about its current political strength. —

Conclusion

Age should trouble us. Our concern as POWES is necessary to address ongoing concerns that mainstream research on ageing is 'gender blind' (Carney, 2018: 242). Indeed, our own analysis of gender relations and identities is limited if we do not account for how culturally valorized femininities are shaped in relation to a haunting of older future selves/Others and the consequences this has for intergenerational dialogue, learning and respect. We weaken our work if we hesitate to examine how gender intersects with commercialized pressures to resist the signs of ageing in ways that reproduce an ethos of individualized responsibility at increasingly younger ages. Our analysis of socio-economic inequalities is limited if we hesitate to appreciate the long shadow that current inequalities have in women's, and in our, longer lives.

We need to think too about what resources and fuels our ability to survive and resist an anti-ageing culture. I applied a critical optimism to ask different questions (what is good about ageing) to feminist-identified women who were already critical or concerned with anti-ageing culture. This opened up a brief opportunity to express anger at anti -ageing and a space to express the gifts that age had given them (confidence, self-contentment and friendships); their insights into their ageing were

not neatly characterised by narratives of decay and loss, nor of what Segal calls the ‘relentless buoyancy’ (2013. 179) of neoliberal active ageing. Rather, they spoke of life as textured and unfolding. This project suggests however, that ageing on our terms needs resources – role models, past battle experience and feminism. These enabled the women in this sample to deal with the cultural pressure to manage their age and it enabled instead a powerful insistence on life as defined by relationships, family, interest and a being- in the world. However, that early encounters with feminist theories, texts and activism could help women counter cultural pressures of heteronormative femininity in their younger lives does give some hope that it could and should in their older lives. Given the power of market forces and the hegemony of neoliberal rationalities there is an urgent need to grow and nurture resources for alternative imaginations so that we may age with a critical awareness of gendered ageism. We have work to do to develop a feminism that calls out gender injustices across our lives and that extends an intersectional analysis to ageing.

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